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HOME > ENVIRONMENT

THE GOVERNMENT AGENCY IN CHARGE OF KILLING WILD ANIMALS IS FACING BACKLASH

Oregon has banned Wildlife Services' use of cyanide bombs, and some California counties have severed their contracts with the agency.

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Wildlife Services is a federal agency that shoots, traps, and poisons wild animals en masse at the behest of state governments, agricultural interests, and more. With a purported mission to reduce human-wildlife conflict and mitigate economic damage caused by wildlife, it kills many thousands of critters that come between ranchers or farmers and their profits, and it has done so for more than a century. Earlier this month, it released up-to-date data about its nationwide operations in 2018 and, as usual, the numbers were eye-popping.

According to the agency, which is housed under the United States Department of Agriculture, its trappers and field operatives killed more than 1.5 million native animals last year. The list of the dead includes roughly 515,000 red-winged black birds, 68,000 coyotes, 22,500 beavers, 19,900 mourning doves, 17,000 black-tailed prairie dogs, 10,000 double-crested cormorants, 2,000 mallard ducks, 1,784 gray foxes, 1,300 red-tailed hawks, 1,000 bobcats, hundreds of owls, 357 wolves, 350 black bears, one grizzly bear, and many, many more.

This sort of killing is quite normal for Wildlife Services, an opaque bureaucracy that has proven remarkably immune to reform over the decades. In his fierce forthcoming book *This Land*, Christopher Ketcham, a public lands journalist who has covered Wildlife Services for *Harper's*, describes the long-tenured agency like this: "True to its mandate, Wildlife Services kills anything under the sun perceived as a threat to stockmen, deploying an arsenal of poisons, traps and aerial gunships at a cost of tens of millions of dollars a year annually. Between 2000 and 2014, two million native mammals fell to this machine, including 20 species of carnivores and 12 taxa of mammals listed as endangered, threatened or as candidates for protection under the Endangered Species Act."

"During the 20th century," he adds, "the agency was probably responsible for the deaths of *tens of millions* of animals," including huge numbers of wolves, cougars, prairie dogs, and other species deemed detrimental to private agricultural interests.

A spokesperson for the U.S. Department of Agriculture wrote in a statement that Wildlife Services works to "mitigate the serious economic impacts" related to wildlife-human conflicts, working closely with state agencies, local governments, and more to "manage wildlife damage using the best available science" and in compliance with all federal, state, and local laws.

Wildlife Services is now grappling with a growing legal and political backlash. Brooks Fahy, an environmental activist and victims' advocate with the non-profit group Predator Defense, has long advocated for the shuttering of Wildlife Services and the abolition of its controversial tactics. He says public outrage about the agency's activities reached "a tipping point" over the last two years—spurring the introduction of legislation to crack down on Wildlife Services at the state and federal level—after news broke in 2017 about the case of an Idaho teenager named Canyon Mansfield and his pet dog Kasey.

Wildlife Services regularly deploys what are known as M-44s, or so-called "cyanide bombs," spring-loaded contraptions that, when triggered by the snout or paw or claw of a curious animal, will release a spray of sodium cyanide that violently kills the victim. The agency deploys such devices in more than a dozen states, including on public lands, often placing them alongside bait to lure unsuspecting predators like coyotes.

In March of 2017, a 14-year-old named Canyon Mansfield went hiking with his pet lab Kasey near his parents' home in Pocatello, Idaho. While exploring a hillside during the hike, he spotted what he described as a "metal tube sticking out between two rocks." He went over to see what it was, bent down, and touched it. Suddenly, he heard a pop and a cloud of orange gas spewed forth, hitting him on the left side of his body and hitting his dog too. He immediately felt a terrible burning sensation and then turned and watched in horror as his dog Kasey started to seize. They had both been sprayed by one of Wildlife Services' cyanide bombs, placed on land just a few hundred feet from the Mansfield family home.

Kasey the dog died right there on the hillside. Mansfield, in an account of his incident, wrote that he "sobbed in pain" as he witnessed his pet succumb to deadly poison. When the police and the fire department arrived, Mansfield was rushed to the emergency room, where he was sprayed down in a decontamination shower and tested for poisons in his blood. Because the cyanide bomb had not sprayed him straight in the face, he did not suffer what could have been fatal consequences, but to this day he is occasionally struck with painful migraines and other maladies.

The U.S. government, in court filings last year, sought to lay blame for the incident on Mansfield and his parents, arguing that it was their "negligence" that caused the incident.

The USDA spokesperson wrote that the agency "understands the public's concern regarding the use of M-44s and is committed to the safe and responsible use of this effective tool for professional wildlife damage management."

Wildlife Services, the statement reads, "uses these devices, along with other predator management tools, safely and responsibly."

The case of Mansfield, though, has sparked intensifying public scrutiny of Wildlife Services' activities. This spring, for instance, Representatives Peter DeFazio (D-Oregon) and Matt Gaetz (R-Florida) introduced a bipartisan bill, known informally as Canyon's Law, that would ban the use of sodium cyanide and another poison called Compound 1080 for predator-control purposes.

"The unnecessary use of these deadly toxins by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Services has led to countless deaths of family pets and innocent animals, as well as injuries to humans," said DeFazio, in a statement. "It is only a matter of time before they kill someone." In April, Canyon Mansfield and his family traveled to Washington, D.C., to advocate for the proposed ban.

Meanwhile, in Oregon, the backlash against Wildlife Services' indiscriminate use of poison scored a major victory in early May when Governor Kate Brown signed into law a ban on cyanide bombs in the state.

"It is a total ban and it is historic," Fahy told me during a phone call while he was driving to Oregon's state capitol to attend a ceremonial signing of the bill. "It was hard fought," he added, noting that powerful agriculture interests like the Oregon Farm Bureau opposed the ban on M-44s.

In California too, conservationists are systematically chipping away at Wildlife Services' ability to operate. Over the last few years, a coalition of animal rights and environmental groups have been using the California Environmental Quality Act to effectively force a string of counties in northern California to sever their contracts with Wildlife Services.

"We have targeted this program in a number of counties, including Shasta, Siskiyou, Monterrey, Sonoma, and Mendocino counties," says Camilla Fox, the founder and executive director of Project Coyote, which advocates for wild predators and has helped lead the push against Wildlife Services in California. "All of those counties have terminated, suspended, or had to consider the environmental effects of their Wildlife Services' contracts, either voluntarily or by court order."

Wildlife Services is also facing a relentless barrage of federal lawsuits. Conservationists, for instance, have taken to using the Endangered Species Act to fight the agency's activities. In late May of this year, the Center for Biological Diversity filed a lawsuit to stop the agency's killing of beavers in California, arguing that such killing harms the state's populations of endangered salmon, which use the habitat provided by beaver dams for sustenance and shelter. The group has also sued Wildlife Services in Arizona, contending that the agency failed to consider the impact of its activities on endangered ocelots that reside in the state. The Center for Biological Diversity settled the Arizona case out of court with Wildlife Services, obtaining new restrictions on the agency's activities in ocelot habitat.

The Mansfields, for their part, have launched something of a crusade against Wildlife Services. They have become staunch opponents of the agency's indiscriminate killing and seek to hold it accountable for the death of their dog and the poisoning of their son. This April, the family traveled from their Idaho home to Washington, D.C., with Fahy to call for the abolition of cyanide bombs and press for the passage of Canyon's Law.

"Most other people would have walked away from it," says Fahy, of the Mansfield's continued struggle. "To have to tell this story over and over and over and over, I can't quite explain how brutal and painful it is."

"Our last night in D.C.," he says, "we got in the [hotel] hallway together and just cried."